

Socratic Seminar

Definition: A Socratic discussion is a text-based discussion (book, story, article, film, event, theatre, photo, painting,) “the distinctive contribution of which is to set alongside one interpretation the several interpretations of other participants, thereby challenging one’s own view of the matter with those of others” [Bridges, 1979]. The aim is a mutual search for a clearer, wider, and deeper (“enlarged”) understanding of the ideas, issues, and values in the “text” at hand. It is shared inquiry, not debate; there is no opponent save the perplexity all persons face when they try to understand something that is both difficult and important. (Walter Parker, Ph. D.)

The Basics

- I. The environment
 - A. Distinctive classroom arrangement
 - B. Posted purpose and norms
 1. Purpose: To achieve an enlarged understanding of the ideas, issues and values in the text.
 2. Norms: Be respectful, Do not raise hands, Use each other’s names, Address each other, Base opinions in the text.
 3. Groups: Small enough to allow for rich discussion with multiple participants.
- II. The Text
 - A. Mild Altering: Possibility for divergent thinking.
 - B. Shared:
- III. The Questions
 - A. Literal Questions: (factual) one correct answer available for all to see.
 1. What happened?
 2. Who...?
 3. When...?
 - B. Interpretive Questions: (genuine) participants make arguments supported by evidence in the text.
 1. What is the most important passage (word)?
 2. What does _____ mean?
 3. What would be a better title?
 - C. Evaluative Questions: participants refer to their own experiences and values rather than the text.
 1. Do you agree with the author?
 2. Is it right (true; just; good) that...?
- IV. Basic Follow-Up Moves
 - A. Verification: “How do you know...?” or “Where does it say that in the text?”
 - B. Clarification: “What do you mean by _____?”
 - C. Elaboration: “Say more about that.” Or “Tell me more...”
 - D. Participation: “What do some of you think” or “Let’s hear from those of you who haven’t spoken yet.”
 - E. Variety: “What’s another idea (reason; cause; interpretation)?”
 - F. Summarizing: “Let’s see where we are...”
 - G. Re-focus: “Interesting! Let’s return to the question”
 - H. Public Inspection: “Let’s explore that idea...”
- V. Debriefing the seminar
 - A. Ask everyone one of two questions:
 1. Was your understanding of the text enlarged?
 2. What’s one thing you noticed about the seminar?
 - B. Then, share what you (the facilitator) learned from the seminar.

Adapted from “Leading Socratic Discussion in the Classroom”, Walter Parker, Ph. D. College of Education, University of Washington, Seattle. 2005.